



'DIGITAL DIVIDE' AND THE WIDENING OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES AMONG THE URBAN AND THE RURAL UNDERGRADUATE GENERAL DEGREE COLLEGES IN THE POST-COVID INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented situation in the post-COVID-19 world leads to a paradigm shift in educational experience; and this experience is going to be a sustainable change. But in a developing country like India, the implementation of this new trend is going to be a huge challenge. Online teaching in colleges and universities in our country, which has been introduced through many problems and barriers, is mainly benefiting the urban students, but marginalized students are completely deprived of this new opportunity that will damage the education system, economy and other important pillars of the country and accelerate overall discrimination.

KEYWORDS: Pandemics, Online Teaching, Digital Challenges, Urban Education, Privatization, Higher Education, Digital Justice.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To find out the causes of digital divide in the urban and rural education scenario during COVID-19 pandemic in India.
2. To find out the consequences of the digital divide in the urban and the rural educational system.
3. To find out the ways and strategies to reduce digital divide in India.

INTRODUCTION:

After COVID-19 19 pandemic, the world is split into two parts—the pre-Corona world and the post-Corona world. Corona has brought huge changes in people's lives. Lockdown has changed many of our ideas. One of them is online study. What was so limited to some professional curricula has now entered the world of larger studies. The unprecedented situation leads to a paradigm shift in educational experience; and this experience is going to be a sustainable change. In the wake of the pandemic, the new normality will be about adaptation, reorientation, skill, and excellency. In the 'New Normal' life, the screen of the mobile phone is sometimes a classroom, sometimes a school ground for the students. In particular, the younger students in private schools have quickly adapted to the new system. From cities to villages everywhere there is a rush to buy smartphones. Many are buying smartphones by borrowing money. If not, the children will fall behind!

Many teachers are skeptical about the extent to which classroom learning is possible online. Initially there was reluctance among students and teachers to take online classes and many were skeptical about the usefulness of this new teaching method. However, in the changed situation, online classes are finally proved to be very effective. Teachers as well as students now have to grab the mobile phone as an alternative to the classroom. For most of the students, online classes now seem to provide a better experience than the traditional mode of learning as they purport to serve various learning designs and approaches and create a more inclusive learning environment.

DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ITS CAUSES:

Digital divide can happen for various reasons. The main reason is economic. In third world countries like India, discrimination is being created mainly in the use of internet due to economic reasons. For study through internet connection, online classes, school and college admissions, high internet speed is required which is very expensive. Thus, digital divide is closely connected to income levels. Just as economically backward people in our country are deprived of many opportunities and rights, they are also being deprived of the fundamental right to education in the age of internet-based education. Because studying in covid conditions is now completely internet dependent. Geographic location is another significant determining factor. Lack of infrastructure has been linked to economic inequality. Digital divide has become more pronounced due to lack of proper infrastructure outside the city. Moreover, there is a considerable shortage of digital literacy among the people of the marginalized areas.

DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ITS CONSEQUENCE:

The school is closed in Corona. Reading is going on online. But in a developing country like India, the implementation of this new trend is meaningless, says Nobel laureate economist Esther Duflo. She claims that the benefits of studying online will reach only a few private students. Inequality will increase. Esther was the keynote speaker at a three-day virtual conference (from 9th October to 11th October, 2020) jointly organized by The Financial Research and Trading Labora-

tory of the Indian Institute of Management-Calcutta and the Stern School of Business at New York University. Speaking at the presentation of an earlier project on curriculum and systemic problems in India's education system, she said, "Covid-19 has brought a tsunami to the education system of developing countries." As schools are closed in India, about 32 crore students are currently at home. Although there are some plans in other countries, it is not clear when the school will reopen in India. There is no overall plan. It may depend on different states.

"Countries like the United States have closed schools and quickly launched online systems," Esther said. But in India, only an average of 26% of households (as of 2016-17) have access to the Internet. In rural areas it is only about 15%. In a developing country like India, that rapid change is meaningless to poor students. The online facility will be available mainly to the students of high class and private schools. After Esther's presentation, the question arises, is the new national education policy likely to solve that problem? Esther thinks it won't make much difference. In particular, there is no indication of a solution to the grassroots problems in the education system.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented educational disruption with 1.2 billion students and youth across the planet affected by school closures (*From COVID-19 Learning Disruption to Recovery: A Snapshot of UNESCO's Work in Education in 2020*). It has not only undermined confidence in the ability of public services such as education and health to respond to the crisis but has also raised more fundamental concerns about the possible erosion of human rights now and in the aftermath of the crisis.

According to the recently published National Sample Survey on Education, the literacy rate in West Bengal has reached 80.5%. But only 9.4% of households in the state have computers. Only 16.5% of households have access to internet. In the whole country, of course, the picture is not so good. The survey said so. Only 10.7% of households in the country have a computer. Only 23.7% of households have internet connection. With the exception of a handful of states like Delhi, Kerala, Haryana, Punjab, the picture is similar in all other states.

Online school classes, even after the launch of exams, have raised questions about the 'digital divide' among students due to the lockdown after Corona. Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, Minister of Human Resource Development, has repeatedly said that the type of school education will change drastically from this time onwards due to the outbreak of 'Atimari' (pandemic). Computer-internet dependence will increase a lot. But various student organizations complained that most families in the country do not have a computer or internet connection. If so, how will the children of poor families study? The survey by the Ministry of Statistics has in fact sealed the deal. According to government sources, the survey was conducted from July 2016 to June 2018. Since then, mobile internet service has become cheaper, and now, thanks to smartphones, internet service has reached home. As a result, the situation has improved a lot. However, the Union Ministry of Education is not claiming that 100 per cent students are able to study online. Because a few days ago, the NCERT under the Ministry of Education conducted a survey among the students, teachers and parents of CBSE School, Kendriya Vidyalaya and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya. The survey found that 26% of students do not have a laptop or smartphone. 26% of students have problems with internet connection due to power shortage. According to UNESCO data, 850 million children and young adults worldwide have paused education because of the pandemic. Most of them are located in underprivileged regions, with low Internet penetration and poor infrastructure.

During pandemic the corporate schools quickly launched online classes. Online teaching in corporate schools in post-COVID India has opened up an opportunity to create a more effective and interactive experiences for students by taking full advantage of available technology. The students of the city are adapting very quickly to this new education system. Since they are already familiar with the internet world, they can easily embrace this new medium of learning and they are also enjoying this new mode. Online teaching is saving them a lot of time. No more time being wasted to travel because they can sit at home and join classes. Thus, urban students in the new normal age sit at home and attend online school classes and also take private tuitions. In countries like India 'private tuition' has emerged as a huge force. In India, private tuition is a parallel system of education that serves as a supplement to the formal education of schools and colleges. Most students in India avail themselves on private tuitions; however, students in urban areas are mostly benefited from private coaching. There are too many professional teachers in the cities. In rural areas, the number of teachers of that quality is relatively small. Besides, you have to invest a lot of money to get private tuition from skilled and professional teachers. Since the families of rural students are relatively far behind in the economic sense, they are deprived of the opportunity to get good quality private tuition. In the current situation, private coaching has thrived remarkably by taking advantage of digital technology.

The online teaching market in the city has grown exponentially as internet services in the city is much improved. Private companies, too, are launching online schools to capture the market. These online schools are investing a lot of money, hiring skilled and efficient teachers and conducting virtual classes with great professionalism. These online schools are mainly dependent on the urban students. Since these online schools are run by private companies, their main purpose is to make profits.

That's why online schools are mostly urban-centric. People in the city are more concerned about the education of children and are willing to invest a lot of money for that purpose. The city's livelihood is mainly job-based. To ensure jobs in public or private institutions, the city's children run the rat race of getting more advanced and up to date education. Private schools exploit this demand to make a profit. These online classes are taught in English and the subjects and the cellist are created to monitor the needs of the people of the city. And these schools create an international standard (which is actually city-centric) in education and infrastructure. So, this kind of online class doesn't help the rural children. The online class environment is completely different from their lives. So, they don't feel united with it.

Public schools have not yet started online classes. Because most teachers and children in public schools live in villages that do not have internet services, or even if they are not as advanced as online classes. So, it seems that all the non-school children in India are disconnected from the long-term education environment.

Many schools are of high quality but not all students come from families with conditions. In most schools, students from the backward part of society still study. They need to be considered first in the online reading. There should be no objection to online classes but students should be able to judge the socio-economic background.

In new situation in India, online classes have become more central to university teaching. As colleges in India also moved to online mode of teaching, many students are left out because they lack access to high internet connectivity. This makes it easy to understand that students in rural colleges are more likely to be deprived of higher education—adding to already deep educational discrimination. As higher education is a step towards securing future jobs, earnings and health, this kind of inequality in education will accelerate the overall inequality between the rich and the poor in the society. So, virtual classes in higher education cannot just be for those who can afford its technology.

Reading in state colleges and universities is all online now. In most cases, the attendance of students in online classes in Colleges of Kolkata has increased slightly compared to the presence of students on campus. This means that more students are taking classes online than they used to in college-university classes in normal times. But, when we leave the city, the picture is changing. Fewer students are taking classes online than they were in the public. Teachers are blaming the lack of smartphones or other online classes for rural Bengali students. On the one hand, the lack of a smartphone-laptop, the lack of fast internet services on the other side is causing problems for both. There are concerns in various places.

The college principals of several colleges in Kolkata reported that online students are more likely to attend classes than in their colleges. In the words of Maulana Azad College Principal, Subhash Dutta, "Now classes are being taken at convenience. There are no restrictions on the campus. So maybe there's more interest." The same claim is made by Indranil Kare, the Principal of Surendranath College. "Students can take classes at comfortable times at home," he said. So maybe the attendance has increased. 'The same picture was given by the principal, Jaideep Shadangi, at New Alipur College. Shyamendu Chattopadhyay, principal of Chittaranjan College, said that as many as 30 of the 150 students attended the classes previously. But the number of students in online classes is going up to 100. "Students are not just making an appearance in online classes," he said, "they're getting interested, too."

However, the picture is just the reverse in colleges outside Kolkata. The online class attendance at several colleges in South 24 Parganas is not very promising. Fewer students come online than the students who came to campus. The teacher in-charge of Shibani Mondal College in Namkhana, Dayalchand Sardar said that the students most likely suffered from internet connectivity problems. Google Meet class started with study material on WhatsApp but it was not very successful yet. Rampa Das, Principal of Maheshtala College, said that many of his college students still didn't have a smartphone. And they didn't have the power to bear the cost of the Internet. The students who attended the college in Vidyanager in South 24 Parganas were not expected to attend online classes, said Surya Agarwal. "Many students still don't have a smartphone," he said. The area where they live are not is not supplied with the fast-paced Internet service. (*2 Different Pictures of Online Classes - Anandabazar*)

Considering the situation, the state higher education authority of West Bengal introduced online admission process. It was also declared that college admission would not call for counselling or verification of documents for students who are willing to enrol. In a release, they said that after the results of the higher secondary, the process of admission to all higher education under the state government for the next academic year would be done online from August next year. "The potential candidates will not be called for counselling or verification of documents during the admission process," the notice said. Eligible candidates will be emailed to specific college authorities and all certificates must be uploaded online. The students will be verified when they come to class later. (Education)

However, in response to the online admission notice, the All Bengal University Teachers Association said in a statement, "If all the admission procedures are online in the event of a crisis, many students in rural and urban areas will not be able to take this benefit." Many colleges, even universities are also facing the same problem as online classes for newly enrolled students. The administrators and professors and teachers of the education world, when they opened the WhatsApp group for the first seminar online class, found that there were not many students who were admitted. Many are not available for the phone number that the students gave at the time of admission. Some have given a cyber cafe or someone else's number. Many people have phone numbers but they don't have WhatsApp accounts. As a result, colleges in rural areas facing tremendous setback in respect of students admission this year.

Several colleges also introduced live classes to resume the course of the first-year student, so that the teacher and the student can recognize each other through the camera. But the problem is there too. "Students have told me that taking a class on a video will cost a lot of data," said Soumik Saha, a Bengali teacher at Sri Chaitanya College in North 24 Pargana. They really can't recharge data every day with so much money. They have to do at least three classes a day. Many people are unable to do the next classes because of the lack of data. As a result, colleges had to postpone live classes. Bappaditya Mandal, Principal of Sonamukhi College in Bankura, says, "The problem with the network is that both the students and the teachers have to go to the places where they can get the network out of the house. That's why it is really getting difficult to bring everyone into class." ("Admission To Colleges In West Bengal Via Online Mode")

Online classes have two facilities. Students across the country are now available to the teachers of the state-run colleges. The government-owned general colleges can deal with expensive private colleges to keep the cost of infrastructure; and recording facilities also help students who cannot join classes in time due to network failure. Through online classes the invited speakers are able to address the students and enrich the classroom experience. This will increase the pressure on the private education business to reduce costs. The chances of the common man benefiting from education will increase. But that hope will be fulfilled if the government has a positive approach. If the government takes the lead in this period and paves the way for privatisation, the benefit of the common man will not be the same.

Second, students who often drop classes on various excuses are also irregular in online classes. And a few in the teacher community who were indifferent previously, they are also taking a nice rest on the lockdown. These two species have no role in the fundamental changes in the educational system. In an earlier time, students used to have some great teachers in their student life, following and imitating them in their pursuit of knowledge. Besides them, there were some average teachers. But students did not have the alternative source to verify the books they used to show, whatever the quality of their speech. But now teachers from across the country are coming out of the window of the college. Not only recorded speeches, but also questions and conversations with them in the electronic media. So, the day of low or medium-class lectures is over today in class.

STRATEGIES FOR REDUCTION OF DIGITAL DIVIDE IN EDUCATION IN INDIA:

Keeping all these issues in mind, the higher education authority needs to take right steps to resolve these problems. Education policy makers have to rethink the condition of existing infrastructure, pedagogical resources of our colleges and universities that suit online learning. Emphasis is to be made to make online learning accessible to all students living in the remote areas; measures are to be taken to build up capacity of teachers and also to facilitate students' readiness for this movement. As Daniel Burgos remarks:

The technology and devices required to access online learning are not equally accessible to all; therefore, online learning is an additional challenge for some learners. It has become obvious that vulnerable learners have suffered during this emergency phase. There is a need to rethink issues of equity in times of crisis. A social safety net must be provided for the most vulnerable to ensure that they have easy access to education. (Burgos 109)

At the moment, the entire teaching profession is facing a tough challenge. The challenge is basically two. One, to adapt in a mixed manner – college practice, online theory from home, meetings at any time in 24 hours – to be physically and mentally adjusted to the demands of this time. And two, to build oneself up by being in harmony with world standards. So, the danger is now in front of the indifferent teachers.

Third, not only the individual teachers, but countless educational institutions will also face challenges. Twenty years ago, children from high-income, upper-middle-class families who came to attend general degree college, today spend millions of dollars, even taking education loans to private educational institutions in the country or even get enrolled in scholarships abroad. This is why the number of students in the science section of the general college is now declining. Science is much more expensive than studying Arts because of laboratory fees and accessories costs. Students are not studying science at large, because of the lack of courage and financial inaction of general college students. As a result, the number of students who need to go to college and practice in the laboratory is less than the percentage of these colleges. The Bengali education system is tuition-dependent, so many students have a non-appearance. Consequently, general degree colleges will face high risk of drop-outs in near future.

The lockdown added another dimension to this. The college authorities now have the opportunity to take everyone to online theory classes. Again, students have the opportunity to take online degree courses. Because according to government policy, IIT or similar educational institutions are starting to study online courses. It is assumed that foreign universities will not miss such opportunities to gain Indian talent and wealth.

Universities should acknowledge that unprivileged students are a main constraint to digital justice in our country. So, universities need to take appropriate measures so that these students are not deprived of the opportunity of online classes. But all these solutions can happen only with a well-designed empowerment plan. Collaborative measures are needed from the central and the state government to supply devices and Internet connections to the remote area students together with a package of services such as emotional support and training on basic competences so that they may not get overflowed by the immediate tsunami of online teaching, the sudden boom in Skype, ZOOM, Meet, Webex, YouTube, and webinars in the post-COVID academic world.

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